

publication of Albion Tourgee's *A Fool's Errand*. He attributed the popularity of that novel to a national interest in African Americans. He believed that he could provide a more accurate portrayal of the black community than Tourgee. Chesnutt published several short stories in the McClure chain of newspapers, and *Atlantic Monthly* published two dialect stories by Chesnutt in 1887 and 1888. In 1899, Chesnutt published *The Conjure Woman*, a collection of stories building upon the traditions of African American folklore. A year later, he published *The House Behind the Cedars*, an exploration of the color line that Chesnutt himself straddled. He originally completed this novel in 1889, entitling it *Rena Walden*, but when he circulated the manuscript among his white friends, he found them unreceptive to the problems posed by the color line.<sup>17</sup>

Chesnutt's treatment of the color line challenged contemporary notions of race and race relations. *The Marrow of Tradition* represented another contribution to the nation's racial discourse. He responded to the criticism of *Rena Walden* in a letter to George Washington Cable, writing, "I suspect that my way of looking at these things is 'amorphous' not in the sense of being unnatural, but unusual."<sup>18</sup> In the years that followed, Chesnutt articulated the belief that whites constructed an "unnatural" concept of race. In the late nineteenth century, popular racial thought utilized scientific explanations that racialized every aspect of human behavior. The contemporary view of blacks stated that they were naturally inferior to whites. Chesnutt wrote a number of essays that revealed policies among white Southerners that suggested the races were not so easily classified. In 1889, Chesnutt published an essay entitled "What is a White Man?," in which he examined the laws that attempted to solidify the color line. He examined state Supreme Court rulings in South Carolina, in which two standards were established for identifying an individual's race: (1) physical features; and (2) "reception into society, and by their exercise of the privileges of a white man."<sup>19</sup> The latter means of defining one's race provided light-skinned mulattoes with the opportunity to pass into white society, thereby disrupting the color line. Chesnutt also mocked white obsession with preserving the color line of their race given whites' transgressions across it, noting that marriage laws were necessary because "Nature, by some unaccountable oversight... neglected a matter so important to the future prosperity and progress of mankind" by permitting physical attraction between blacks and whites. His essay exposed the permeability of the color line, the difficulty of defining whiteness, and the transgressions that blurred the races.<sup>20</sup>

In a series of essays entitled "The Future American," published in the *Boston Evening Transcript* in 1900, Chesnutt predicted that the interbreeding of whites, blacks, and Indians would eventually create a racially mixed citizenry. Realizing the advantages of being white, Chesnutt once flirted with the idea of passing into white society. He eventually reached the

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Chesnutt are available on-line at <http://www.berea.edu/faculty/browsers/chesnutt/intro.html>, a website created by Berea College English professor Stephanie Berea.

<sup>17</sup> John W. Wideman, "Chesnutt, Charles Waddell," in *Dictionary of American Negro Biography*, pg. 103-107; William L. Andrews, *The Literary Career of Charles W. Chesnutt* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980), pg. 11-12.

<sup>18</sup> Quoted in Andrews, *Literary Career*, pg. 27.

<sup>19</sup> Charles Chesnutt, "What is a White Man?," *The Independent* 41 (May 30, 1889): 5-6.

<sup>20</sup> Chesnutt, "What is a White Man?," 5-6; Wilson, *Whiteness*, pg. 6-7.